Detective Elmer Colby Matthews | Cincinnati, New Orleans and Texas Pacific Railroad



Age: 25
Served: 3 years
1912 to August 18, 1915

OFFICER

Elmer was born September 27, 1890 in Harrison County, Kentucky, the third of four children born to farmers, Thomas and Willie Susan (Jones) Matthews. His mother died two days after his fifth birthday on September 29, 1895. His father remarried, and between 1898 and 1904 had three more children.

During or before 1912, Elmer moved to Cincinnati. He joined the Cincinnati, New Orleans and Texas Pacific Railroad as a Detective. On May 21, 1913, he married Verna Louise Wiglesworth, his hometown sweetheart.

For several months during 1915, Detective Matthews was detailed to ride a freight train leaving Cincinnati shortly before 1 a.m.

His assignment was to arrest stowaways and thieves that were commonly boarding and/or breaking into train cars. Each day, he would ride the train and get off at Erlanger.

This was dangerous work in 1915. During the previous fifteen months, five law enforcement officers had lost their lives in or near greater Cincinnati railroad yards: Special Agent Cleveland Kemp in the Silver Grove yards below Newport; Superintendent Elija Boileau in the Camp Washington yards in Cincinnati; Detective Leslie Johnson in the Silver Grove yards; Patrolman James O'Neil in the Sedamsville yards in Cincinnati; and Private Police Officer Martin O'Herron near the railroad yards in Covington.

INCIDENT

On August 18, 1915, as the CNO&TP train was bound for the Erlanger Fair, it was boarded near Ludlow by two hoboes. Detective Mathews placed them under arrest. They seemed to have submitted, but between Ludlow and Crescent Springs one went to the side as if to jump off and the other reached into his pocket and pulled a Colt revolver. Detective Matthews tried to disarm the man with the Colt then the other pulled a revolver and shot Detective Matthews.

Brakeman James Fleming happened to be on top of the car at that moment, saw what happened, and the tramps fired shots at him as he fled to get help. He came back with Conductor John Carney and Brakeman Fred Surber.

The shooters had jumped off and Detective Matthews was lying face down on the floor of the car. He had been shot five more times since Fleming saw the initial engagement – once through the heart. He was missing his .38 Special Colt Police Special

revolver.
When they turned him over, he gave a gasp and died.

The train continued on to Crescent Springs where his murder was reported to Kenton County Sheriff Allison and Ludlow Chief of Police Callahan. Detective Matthews was taken to his home at 9 Latta Avenue in Ludlow.

FUNERAL

He was predeceased by his mother, Willie Susan Matthews in 1895, and his sister Lulie A. McKenny just a year before. Detective Matthews was survived by his wife of two years, Verna Louise Matthews; father, Thomas Matthews; stepmother, Mary Jane Matthews; grandfather, Richard Matthews; siblings, Sarah J. (Thomas) Syndor, Richard R. (Gertrude) Matthews, Emma E. Matthews, Cora B. Matthews, and Lewis T. Matthews; and brother-in-law, Leslie B. McKenney.

His body was viewed by hundreds of people as he was laid out at his residence on July 18, 1915, and then taken back to his old home in Hinton County on July 19, 1915. Funeral services were held on July 21, 1915. He was buried in Raven Creek Cemetery, Harrison County, Kentucky.

INVESTIGATION

Sheriff Allison, his deputies, and local police officers began tracking the murderers immediately after the murder was reported. Two bloodhounds were brought in from Lexington.

A farmer named Holtheit was out hunting and saw tramps running from the railroad property. He assumed they were in trouble and held them at bay with his double barrel shotgun. But, when the

train passed, believing that he had been mistaken, he let them go. The Sheriff, posse, and bloodhounds tracked the killers through cornfields to Holtheit's farm but arrived after the farmer had let them go.

As they closed in on the pair again near Schott's Chapel below Bromley, the killers hired a skiff at a fishing camp and a man to row them across the Ohio River to near the Anderson Ferry. The Cincinnati Police Department was notified, but to no avail.

After more than two months of investigation and working with informants, Leonard Prather was developed as a principal suspect. On October 31, 1915, he was found and arrested in Cincinnati. Based on letters found there Richard Donehy (35) was determined to be his accomplice and he was found and arrested in Lexington the next day on November 1, 1915. Behind the building that Donehy occupied was found the .38 Special Colt Police Special revolver that was taken from Detective Matthews on the day of his murder.

JUSTICE

On November 8, 1915, Donehy and Prather were arraigned before Judge Walter Cleary. A special grand jury was convened on November 9, 1915. On November 11, both were indicted for Murder in the 1st Degree.

Their trial began January 10, 1916 in front of Judge F. M. Tracy, Kenton County. Stephen L. Blakely prosecuted for the Commonwealth. Judge Tracy appointed for the indigent suspects Attorneys O. M. Rogers and R. S. Holmes. The killers' defense were alibis that were propped up by their friends. Donehy claimed to have been in Dandridge, Kentucky on the night of the murder. During cross-examination, he said he was in

Louisville. Acquaintances testified that Prather was in Cincinnati. However, prosecution witnesses from Lexington described how Donehy bragged that he made Matthews dance until his tongue fell out and his throat rattled. Another witness testified that Donehy tried to sell him Matthews's revolver. Both defendants were found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment by Judge Tracy.

They appealed and, on May 31, 1916, the Kenton County Circuit Court affirmed the sentence. How long they actually served is not known.

EPILOGUE

Verna Louise Matthews joined her young husband a month after this murder, having taken her own life on September 13, 1915. Detective Matthews' other sister, Sarah, died four months after him on Christmas 1915.

If anyone has any information, artifacts, or images related to this officer of incident, please contact the Greater Cincinnati Police Museum at Memorial@olice-museum.org.

© This narrative was created on July 28, 2013 by Cincinnati Police Lieutenant Stephen R. Kramer (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Executive Director, based on research material provided by Cincinnati Police Homicide Detective Edward W. Zieverink III (Retired), Greater Cincinnati Police Museum Historian. All rights are reserved to them and the Greater Cincinnati Police Historical Society.